

Negotiating a Democratic Learning Space through Teacher Cultural Narrative

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This study examines 23 in-service teachers' cultural perspectives, as displayed by interactions within a graduate course on diversity at a North American university. The study draws from sociocultural theory that emphasizes culturally responsive pedagogy, and the relationship between lived experience and worldview. An assumption is that, by providing opportunities to reflect on their cultural identities, teacher perspectives may be refocused to meet the needs of different students. Qualitative analyses examine how teachers construct their cultural identities with respect to dimensions such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and language, as well as how teachers relate these identities to the larger community. Over the course of a semester, teachers began to articulate new understandings of cultural privilege, and to acknowledge the influence of cultural diversity within their school communities. Findings point to the strength of narrative in teacher education for cultural responsiveness.

Keywords: Cultural identity, cultural responsiveness, teacher education

Introduction

Strengthening cultural responsiveness and willingness to engage with issues of diversity is a critical piece of teacher education (Hayes & Juarez, 2012). As defined by Ladson-Billings (1994), cultural responsiveness is a pedagogy that uses “cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 382). Cultural responsiveness is therefore a prospective remedy for the mismatch of cultural identities that can occur when the profiles of teachers and their students are wildly dissimilar (Foster, Lewis, & Onafowara, 2003). This paper traces teachers’ cultural identities as demonstrated by interactions within a graduate course on diversity in education.

Theoretical Perspectives

The study draws from socio-cultural theory that emphasizes, first, the criticality of culture and the part it plays in a teacher’s identity and pedagogy, and second, the notion of narrative as means to capture the relationship between lived experience and worldview. Culture, defined by Dewey (1916) is “the capacity for constantly expanding the range and accuracy of one’s perception of meanings” (p. 123). Within the theoretical construct of this study, culture is viewed through the frame of positioning theory, which emphasizes the interactions between self and “other” that shape our social reality. Positioning theory conjectures that cultural identities are not static but rather fluctuate in response to these interactions

(Andreouli, 2010). The assumption of this study is that, through written cultural autobiography and written and verbal dialogue, teachers will come to understand cultural identity and its influence on pedagogical practices and teacher-student relationships. An expectation is that this examination will carry over into the classroom and support a more ethical, equitable, democratic space for diverse students (Bartolomé, 2004) as teachers become more responsive to cultural differences.

Vital to teachers' cultural responsiveness is making the deliberate choice to embrace student difference and assume student competence (Gay, 2000). Engaging teachers in meaningful dialogue can provide a basis for them to clarify and push the boundaries of their own deeply held cultural beliefs (Assaf & Dooley, 2010), beliefs which may stifle cultural responsiveness. The "mutual shaping that occurs as ideas are shared" through dialogue "creates opportunities for individual worldviews to be enhanced" (Stewart & McClure, 2013, p. 95). Articulating one's cultural beliefs through narrative is a dialogic process that similarly engages individuals in (de) constructing cultural identities through the narrative choices they make (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative in this study is defined as the whole of the written and verbal exchanges undertaken by teachers throughout the course.

Study Description

This qualitative study documents in-service teachers' unfolding perspectives on the cultural identities they claim for themselves. The study is guided by the question, first, of how teachers construct their cultural identities with respect to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language, and other dimensions of difference, and second, how teachers relate their own cultural identities to the larger community including the students they teach.

Methods

Participants. The study examines the cultural perspectives of 23 in-service teachers (all female) who enrolled in an American university graduate certificate to work with culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Teachers were drawn from rural K-12 school districts; they represent different grade levels (K-12) and subject areas (all core subjects, ESL, Spanish, reading, special education).

The study focuses on teacher interactions within the first course in the program sequence, Development and Diversity, which is taught by the researcher. The course intentionally involves teachers in the exploration of their cultural identities, taking the stance that only then can they "comprehend and appreciate their students' cultural backgrounds" (Ndura, 2004, p. 1). Thus, course texts challenge teachers' perspectives, and emphasize the importance of noticing our own assumptions, biases and understandings when confronted with difference.

Data Sources and Analyses. Data sources include teachers' written cultural autobiographies and verbatim dialogue related to diversity. Data were analyzed using

a grounded theory approach (Birks & Mills, 2011) that incorporated both open and selective coding; and clustered findings by prominent themes arising from the data.

To begin the process of weaving a narrative of cultural identity, teachers are asked to compose a cultural autobiography describing various aspects of their culture and the effect on their lives and teaching. Teachers are asked to describe their personal or individual development; interactions or experiences where they had a newfound understanding of another's culture; and the ethnic, linguistic, racial, socioeconomic affiliations that have been a part of their life, and influenced who they are.

In addition to a cultural autobiography, teachers are asked to extend their narrative through face-to-face and online dialogue with peers. Dialogues are semi-structured (i.e., focusing questions that relate to the current topic are provided). Each dialogue takes place over the course of one week or more. These additional narratives demonstrate teacher capacity for transforming their cultural perspectives through interactions.

For this paper, analyses were limited to two sets of dialogue especially salient to the notion of cultural responsiveness: A discussion of implicit bias in response to results from one or more implicit association tests, and a discussion of explicit bias in response to a video of a social experiment. These discussions occurred near the midpoint and end of the course for these 23 teachers.

Results and Discussion

Dimensions of Culture in Written Cultural Autobiographies

As expressed in their written cultural autobiographies, teachers constructed their cultural identities in terms of race, ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, religion, and gender - dimensions of diversity specifically mentioned in the assignment. Cultural identity was also defined in terms of unique experiences or perspectives that teachers indicated were of importance. This section presents the individual dimensions of diversity identified. Dimensions are in descending order of frequency (i.e., the number of teachers who included this dimension in their cultural autobiographies).

Race. A majority of teachers (18/23) assigned themselves to one or more racial categories. Thirteen of the twenty-three teachers identified themselves as Caucasian or White, one as Asian, one as Hispanic/Latina, one as Black, and two as racially mixed (African American/Cherokee) European/Native American).

Socioeconomic status. Eighteen of the twenty-three teachers described their past or current socioeconomic status (i.e., blue collar, working class, middle or upper middle class) as part of their cultural identity. However, many teachers also avoided or qualified this terminology, choosing to situate more precisely with regard to status (e.g., "I grew up in a working community... I consider myself a middle class citizen based on the assets I own and my educational background" -T15). Teachers who qualified their status were from low, middle and higher income backgrounds.

Religion. Sixteen of the teachers identified themselves as religious or having a religious background that included Baptist, Catholic, Christian, Evangelical Christian, Hindu or simply “church.” In many cases, religion was described as a strong influence on these teachers’ cultural identities (e.g., I firmly believe that my life has a distinct plan and purpose. I am a teacher because I believe this to be my calling” - T16).

Ethnicity. Less than half of the teachers (9) identified their ethnic affiliation. Among the nine, the following ethnicities were identified: Anglo/English, French, German, Irish, Scandinavian, Scottish, Slovakian, Southern, Welsh. In a face-to-face discussion following the cultural autobiography assignment, teachers referred to the “problem” of naming their ethnic group.

Language. Eight teachers identified their native language and other languages that they spoke well or fluently. One Hispanic/Latina teacher explained, “...my mother tried very hard to keep me grounded, and to keep me true to my culture; by this time, I spoke English most of the time, and sometimes even to her. I would sometimes mix Spanish and English and she would sternly say, “You either speak Spanish or English but not both at the same time” - T5)

Gender. Only two of the teachers specifically mentioned their own gender (female), both in a simple declarative (e.g., “I am a 49-year old female”).

Unique experience or perspective. Teachers, too, chose to describe personal experiences or qualities that did not fit within the other categories of diversity. Teachers wrote, for example, of mental illness within their family and of mothers who modeled a love of reading. Teachers described their passion for teaching, their shyness, their persistence. This emphasis on the personal may be related to the “high value placed on being a unique and independent person” that is one hallmark of the American culture (Leichtman, Wang, & Pillemer, 2003, p. 92). It may also be a reflection of the limitations on fully capturing one’s cultural identity solely in terms of a small number of cultural dimensions.

Summary of Dimensions of Culture

Overall, teachers in this study were more apt to identify with race, socioeconomic status, and religion than with any other dimensions of diversity. However, assigning their race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status was problematic for many teachers, including those who chose to name one or more affiliations. Encouraging these teachers to move beyond what may be considered an “underdeveloped” sense of cultural identity is viewed as essential to the process of gaining cultural responsiveness (Bender, Negi, & Fowler, 2010).

Cultural Positioning in Written Cultural Autobiographies

Teachers’ cultural autobiographies also demonstrate the ways in which they position themselves within the larger culture. Four main themes depicting teachers’

view of their cultural identities or place emerged from the data, though these categories were not mutually exclusive.

Culturally congruent with the dominant culture. Ndura (2005) found in her study of teachers' cultural identities that, "sometimes, an individual's own cultural identity is so embedded in the core mainstream culture that his or her micro culture is seen as inconsequential or even trivialized" (p. 12). Similarly, the majority of cultural autobiographies analyzed for the current study demonstrated these teachers' belief that they had no culture other than being part of a particular segment of American culture (e.g., "When I think about diversity in terms of my family, there was not much. They are all white, middle class" -T12).

In contrast, three cultural autobiographies demonstrated a different perspective, that of being a cultural outsider (e.g., "...everybody at [name of university] did not appreciate the presence of Black students in that school, not even the teachers" - T2). Teachers who wrote of alienation were from diverse racial categories. In addition, teachers did not express the idea that they were outsiders in all areas of their lives. Instead, they wrote of situations where they could draw parallels to the feelings their students might be experiencing.

Culturally privileged. As teachers reflected on their cultural autobiographies, one conclusion they made was that they had privileges not available to others – privileges in the form of community ties, relative financial security and adult role models who emphasized a strong work ethic, respect for others, and education. Teachers also expressed the idea that since their own cultural autobiography was one of privilege, they owe it to their students to support them in their struggles. One teacher reasoned: "I am teaching children with needs, who may not have someone in their life to expose them to adventures of the world or to hope" (T14).

The idea that we hold a relatively privileged position in society has possible negative effects on our teaching. Zwiers (2007), for example, speaks of the "linguistic enabling" (p. 107) that he found in a seventh grade classroom as teacher expectations of student inability were linked to student opportunities and outcomes.

Changing in response to lived experience. Teacher cultural autobiographies reflected a sense of cultural identity as mutable, primarily as a result of exposure to other places and people through literature, work, migration or travel. As one teacher reported, "I developed a newfound understanding of other cultures through my experience teaching ESL for church" (T10). Another teacher described her move to a more insular community in which "racial tension combined with a southern, rural culture where everyone knew each other since generations back left me an outsider for the first time in my life" - T18). Writing about encounters with new communities and cultures seemed to facilitate teachers' growing cultural awareness.

Free of cultural bias. Cultural bias in teaching refers to behaviors that acknowledge only the contributions and perspectives of the dominant social group

(Strickland, 2000). Cultural bias, for example, influences the choice of literature read class, or the role models displayed. Teachers in this study wrote little about their cultural biases in the autobiography assignment, choosing to focus on their lack of bias or acceptance of diversity (e.g., “I do not judge them [my students] for their race or socioeconomic status; I would only be a hypocrite if I did” - T14; “I have consistently been drawn towards people who are different from me” - T9).

Denying the reality of cultural bias may be seen as a natural defense since acknowledging bias is uncomfortable for most individuals. However, ignoring cultural difference and the perceptions we have may further societal inequities rather than lessen them (Holoien & Shelton, 2012). One teacher touched on this in her concluding remarks: “by viewing people as so similar I think I have failed to appreciate that the beauty of people is in their differences” (T4).

Summary of Cultural Positioning

A majority of the teachers in this study positioned themselves as part of the dominant, privileged culture, sometimes in contrast to the students they teach. On the whole, teachers positioned themselves as responsive to cultural difference and free of cultural bias. Through the development of cultural autobiography, teachers had the opportunity to reflect more deeply on the concept of cultural identity and its influence on their lives.

Teacher Dialogue

Implicit bias. Teachers are asked to assess their implicit or unconscious biases using one of several tests (implicit.harvard.edu), and discuss the implications for themselves and their students. Unlike the earlier cultural autobiographies, teacher dialogue demonstrated the willingness of some teachers to accept implicit biases as both inevitable and a source of learning. The following excerpt from one discussion is representative of this finding:

And because people tend to think of themselves as “normal” or “good,” anything different is viewed as the opposite – bad! This is how bias is made, and, depending on how strong a feeling a person may have, prejudice and hatred. So I wonder, for those of us who do oppress our unintentional instinctive bias and do treat people equally, do we really? Or do we just think and hope we do? (T1)

...I also wonder whether my personal biases may affect the way that I interact with others more than I am aware. Regardless of how accurate the tests were, I think they served their purpose in encouraging us to consider this. (T16)

As the discussion moved from the teachers’ own biases to their classrooms, teachers demonstrated that, even when they do not recognize or openly admit to the

biases they themselves hold, they notice bias in the language or behavior of their students. As one teacher remarked:

I can help students recognize their own bias by their comments made in class... I can use them as an opportunity to teach and reflect. I had a student refer to Muslims as diaper heads in class because her dad used the phrase she admitted. I asked her to think about her word choice and the connotation and how that would make others feel (T10)

The discussion of implicit bias appeared to be an engaging one for teachers, and teachers drew from course materials, their areas of expertise and day-to-day experiences to describe their perspectives.

Summary of Implicit Bias Dialogue

Teacher dialogue demonstrated differences in teacher acceptance of their own unconscious biases. While some teachers considered the possibility, teachers also chose to emphasize the biases of other people, including their students. Teachers showed a willingness to engage with their students on sensitive issues, and to connect course discussions to their teaching. In general, teacher dialogue demonstrated more acceptance of cultural identity and its influence than was evident in their written autobiographies.

Explicit bias. Teachers were asked to view and discuss a video related to a social experiment conducted by American teacher Jane Elliott. This “blue eyes/brown eyes” experiment examines how students' beliefs about themselves as successful learners may be dependent on whether or not they are part of the dominant group. One teacher rejected the relevance of the experiment, suggesting that cultural bias is not a significant part of the current social climate:

In a time when discrimination and hate was prevalent it may have seemed necessary to conduct an experiment such as this one. Schools have been integrated for so long that our students do not see the difference between themselves except maybe for language differences and socioeconomic differences. (T13)

Teachers were uncomfortable with the experiment depicted in the video but the majority also saw it as an important learning experience, explicitly linking the idea of cultural privilege to student performance (e.g., “A two-day experiment of experiencing both inferiority and superiority made so much difference. All I can think after seeing this is how must a lifetime of experiencing either inferiority or superiority affect someone?” - T12).

Several teachers recognized the limitations that their individual cultural identities impose on their worldview and ability to empathize (e.g., “As much as we long to understand that or think we do understand that as a white woman in the middle class I know that it isn’t something I can fully understand” (T8). This piece of

dialogue is indicative of teachers' emerging ease with referring to race, and with describing race as a socially powerful concept.

In some instances, teachers responded to the feelings engendered by the social experiment shown in the video by identifying themselves as a possible agent of social change (e.g., I remember the little girl saying their group did poorly because they just kept thinking about those collars they had to wear. From just watching, I want to be a teacher who removes those collars!" -T7; "How can we become more aware of our own biases and prejudices and what can we do to change them?" -T8). This discussion demonstrates recognition among these teachers that we all play a part in creating and upholding inequities. It contrasts with the cultural autobiographies written at the beginning of the semester in that recognition.

Summary of Explicit Bias Dialogue

Overall, teacher dialogue demonstrated an understanding of the influence of cultural bias on learning. The effect of the social experiment on student performance resonated with teachers and they were able to make connections to their own classrooms. A majority of teachers responded by acknowledging their privilege in society and their power and responsibility as teachers.

Conclusions

This study examined teachers' perspectives in relation to the construction of cultural identity demonstrated within a graduate course on diversity in education. Of special significance is the opportunity the course afforded for extending cultural awareness through written and verbal interactions. Limitations of the study include those imposed by the constraints of the course assignments and course length. Assignment instructions framed teacher discussions in particular ways that might not occur in the absence of those instructions. Although the ten weeks of the course were long enough for teachers to develop the trust demonstrated in their dialogue, a second semester would have allowed for a deeper understanding of outcomes for their students. Nonetheless, findings point to the strength of narrative in teachers' recognition of cultural identity and difference.

Teachers initially struggled with where to situate themselves in terms of race, socioeconomic status and ethnicity, and believed themselves to be relatively unbiased. On the whole, teachers took for granted their cultural identities as typical of their communities. Teachers took for granted, too, the ways in which aspects of our diversity position us as privileged or its opposite in society. Through course-mediated dialogue, teachers began to articulate new understandings of cultural privilege and inequities, and to acknowledge the influence of cultural diversity within their school communities.

Given the predictability of social disparity, furthering cultural responsiveness through teacher professional development is an important consideration. This study helps us understand the complexities of learning to create a space for difference in

schools. It documents the process of teachers uncovering their own cultural perspectives; and recognizing the influence on their teaching. Comfort with cultural identity is a step in the process of viewing “cultural difference as a rich source of learning opportunities rather than a threat to classroom cohesion” (Ndura, 2004, p. 16). In general, teachers in the study exhibited an increasing level of comfort with explicit discussions of sensitive issues related to bias, including issues of race and privilege. Negotiating this critical dialogue is part and parcel of a democratic school environment. A conclusion for teacher educators is to embrace similar assignments and conversations as a means to extend teacher insights and, ultimately, responsiveness to cultural difference.

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